

The Fiction Magazine Section

HER DECISION

"I only go to prove," observed Miss Hawkes, severely, "that so vacillating a person must be more or less morally defective. If Miss Decatur had any proper sense of her obligations she would never have given paying guests such a dinner as we had tonight."

"But aunt Sarah," Marjorie Randolph ventured diffidently, "the dinner here are almost always good, but Norah has been suffering with neurasthenia all day, and—"

"Miss Decatur spoils Norah shamefully and we suffer the consequences of her credulous good nature," interposed Charlotte Craig, a clear-eyed young person with the authoritative, somewhat dictatorial manner of a successful professional nurse.

"What can you expect of a woman who confesses to having sat up till 4 o'clock in the morning reading novels?" laughed Honor Temple. "But I flatter myself," she added triumphantly, "that I have cured our hostess of wasting her time over 'swashbuckler' romances."

"I consider it an important part of my duties as librarian to elevate the public taste, and I have persuaded Miss Decatur to renounce trashy fiction in favor of a course of historical reading, varied by an occasional really good psychological novel."

Little Kate Kendrick, a stenographer, looked up from the chafing-dish in which she was compounding a mixture of lobster, eggs and cream to say, crisply:

"I enjoy 'swashbuckler' romances myself, Honor, and I shall not allow you to bluff me out of reading them, but, of course, you can twist Miss Decatur round your little finger, for she has no more mind of her own than a jellyfish—hurry up with those sandwiches, Sarah; this newberg is ready."

The pangs of threatened starvation allayed, the girls chattered amiably as they nibbled fudge and drank their coffee, at peace with all the world, even their delinquent landlady.

There came a knock at the door, and Miss Decatur entered the room. "She was a pretty little woman whose brown hair, although plentifully threaded with silver, was still wavy and abundant, and time and trouble had left no disfiguring traces on her sweet, pale face."

Marjorie Randolph, more discerning or more sympathetic than the others, soon discovered that their hostess had something on her mind which was making her conversation even more rambling and incoherent than usual. "What is the trouble, Miss Decatur?" she asked finally. "Norah is no worse, I hope."

"No dear," replied Miss Decatur. "Norah is doing nicely, and will, I trust, be quite herself tomorrow. But, O my dear girls," she went on breathlessly,

"I can hardly bring myself to speak of it—Miss Graham—quick consumption, the doctor tells me—quite incurable—though it may be months—"

Then Miss Hawkes, who was an excellent teacher of mathematics and absolutely conscientious in the performance of what she conceived to be her duty, exclaimed:

"Poor Miss Graham—what a fate! One of us must make it a point to visit her at least twice a week, for, of course, she will be taken to a hospital immediately."

"The doctor suggested it," returned Miss Decatur, "but she has a horror of such institutions and she has begged me to let her die here, in the only home she has known for 20 years."

"A most unreasonable request," commented Miss Hawkes, brusquely. "Yes," Kate Kendrick, who regarded all problems from a business, not an ethical, standpoint, agreed. "I understand that Miss Graham has nothing but a small annuity, which while ample to pay her way in a hospital, would not allow for the board and wages of a competent nurse to attend her here."

"You must not think of granting such a request, Miss Decatur," urged Honor Temple. "Your hands are more than full as it is."

"You simply cannot afford to do this thing, Miss Decatur," Kate Kendrick argued. "If we all leave for such a reason you will not find it easy to fill our places."

"No—no," sighed Miss Decatur, "but I have a little more laid away. I—I don't blame you girls—it is very depressing to be in the same house with a hopeless invalid."

"But perhaps when—when it is all over you will come back to me? I—I am very fond of you, my dear," she concluded with a certain quaintness.

"If we find our new quarters comfortable I think it improbable that we shall return," said Miss Hawkes coldly.

"Well, dear, I shall miss you," was all the little woman replied as she wavered out of the room in the same undecided manner in which she entered it.

To the surprise of the "paying" guests' their vacillating hostess allowed them to depart without any further remonstrance.

The apartments at "The Markoon" were pleasant, the cuisine unexceptionable, and in the midst of their duties and pleasures the four back-

they except by offerings of fruit and flowers and daily inquiries at the door. Several months had passed when she came in to announce with tears in her eyes that the troubles of the lonely spinster were over.

"Miss Decatur looks 10 years older," she told the four, "although she has been so brave and cheerful through it all. I'm afraid that she must have spent all her little savings, and I think, girls, that we ought to offer to return to her at once."

"Girls," she began hesitatingly, "I met Norah Goggin on the street a few days ago. Miss Decatur was obliged to dismiss her when we left, but Norah has been very loyal and has often run in to help with the rough work when she had a day off."

"She says that our rooms are still vacant and she's afraid," Marjorie concluded; "that Miss Decatur's bit of money must be gone, for, by the looks of the pantry shelves she's often 'backin' the bit and sup'."

less and selfish and I shall go with Marjorie if Miss Decatur will have me."

"We were just as bad, Sarah—we'll go, too," chorused the others without accord, Honor Temple adding reflectively:

"Why couldn't we go back to our old rooms while Miss Decatur is dining with Marjorie and her father? It won't be necessary to ask permission, for I am sure that nothing would delight Miss Decatur more than a Christmas gift of her former 'paying' guests."

"Let's go and ask Marjorie if she could manage it," proposed Honor. They discovered Marjorie indulging in the feminine luxury of "a good cry," but her sorrow was quickly turned to rejoicing when their project was divulged.

Promptly at 10 o'clock on the following day, Marjorie and Mr. Randolph, a handsome, well-groomed man of 50 odd, appeared and carried Miss Decatur away with them, and not five minutes later a beaming maid opened the doors of the Decatur homestead to various errand boys laden with motley bundles, and to four young women with their arms full of Christmas greens.

Three hours later the unsuspecting Miss Decatur, lured back to her home by Marjorie on the pretext of wishing to rearrange her windblown hair before going in to the Huron, stood dazed at the sight and sounds that greeted her on the threshold.

In an instant she was surrounded by her errant "paying" guests, and a scene ensued that caused Mr. Randolph to walk hastily to the window to hide his misty eyes.

Miss Decatur was so unconscious of having done anything heroic, or of having any cause for resentment that the unsentimental man of business muttered chokily:

"That little woman is a trump, if she does look as limp as a rag doll that has been better days."

But when the "rag doll" had been swept upstairs and reappeared half an hour later wearing a new gray silk, the girls had thought this wide-eyed, 15 years' standing felt an unaccustomed thrill in the region of his heart, for it was a transfigured Miss Decatur who took her place at the head of the festive board.

Her small head was erect with the proud little lift that had been admired in the far off days of her girlhood, before it had been bowed by

time and trouble. To Honor Temple, whom "much but I know that Miss Decatur needs me."

Without waiting for a reply she fled to her own room, for to take such a decided step had been a difficult thing for the delicate girl and she breaded her friends' disapproval.

The four stared at one another for a moment in blank silence and Miss Hawkes' handsome face grew a trifle pale.

Little Marjorie had imperceptibly crept into her heart until the thought of doing without her caused that hitherto conditioned organ to sink in a novel and unpleasant fashion. Then she flushed as she said with unvoiced reading of modern novels had made mad on the subject of psychology, her hostess, as the dinner progressed, became such a case, and you can hear for yourself that she is ending her sentences without a single modifying or qualifying clause—and—yes, actually—venturing to disagree with Sarah."

But Charlotte shook her head. "No, it isn't that—it's her new frock," she returned positively. "Miss Decatur can see that none of us, even pretty Marjorie, can hold a candle to her tonight and the knowledge that she is a beauty would give any woman confidence."

A red head was thrust unceremoniously between the disputants and Kate Kendrick laughed mischievously.

"You're both wrong—this bursting into bloom with the suddenness of a night-blooming cereus is due to the fact that Miss Decatur, to quote her own eighteen thirty fiction, is receiving the attentions of a gentleman."

"Just see the assiduity with which Mr. Randolph is serving her to the dearest bits of the turkey instead of permitting her to satisfy her hunger with drumsticks, as cranky bidders have done for 20 years!"

"I see a light in his blue eyes which make me mistrust that within six months a teacher, a librarian, a professional nurse and a stenographer will again be occupying apartments at 'The Markoon.'"



IT WAS INDEED A HAPPY CROWD THAT GATHERED FOR THE SUMPTUOUS REPERT.

elms seldom found time for more than an occasional careless inquiry concerning the invalid and the faithful friend who had sacrificed her own interests in order that a fractious old woman might have "a home" to die in.

Marjorie, she of the sensitive mouth and tender eyes, was made of different clay from these practical young persons, but as her aunt had forbidden her, on the ground of possible contagion, to enter the house, she could do little to express her sympathy.

But the proposition was received with marked disfavor.

A few days later, however, Marjorie came in from her walk with a look of determination on her childish face, and, sitting down at her desk, she wrote a long letter which she posted before she slept.

For a week she kept her own counsel, but on the day before Christmas she entered the room where the others, in a whirl of red and green tissue paper and "holly" ribbon, sat doing up and directing dainty packages.

The young women glanced up from their pretty task with shocked, astonished eyes, but Marjorie hurried on.

"So I wrote and told daddy all about it and he says, Aunt Sarah, that I may go back to Miss Decatur and have her for my chaperon. Daddy is coming to town tomorrow and I have sent a note to Miss Decatur inviting her to dine with us at 'The Huron.'"

"I shall have to leave you all—we have had such jolly times together, humility."

"I feel that I've been very thought-

FATE'S DECREE

Mawaiting your answer with the utmost eagerness; may I not beg that you will shorten the period of my suspense by using the wire?"

Susie Nording frowned at the clean-cut writing. It was just like Joel Meade to write his proposal on a business letter head, and to ask her to telephone her answer.

She wondered why he had not dictated the letter to his stenographer. She could not know that it was only because he had sent the typist to a roof garden show that he had not done so.

Meade was old and unattractive, and his days of romance were the days of long ago, but he was a close business friend of her father, and the latter had pressed Meade's suit far more vigorously than had Meade himself.

Susie disliked him intensely, she always had, even when as a little girl he had drawn her upon his knee, and had offered her candy that was sticky and mixed with the tobacco he carried in the same pocket.

The idea of their marriage was intolerable to her, but Susie lacked the will power to take a firm stand, and she had weakly promised even while she passionately assured herself that she would never marry anyone except Ted Boroun.

It was his financial status as much as old friendship that gave Meade the

advantage with Susie's father, and she had been sent to the shore for her vacation with the warning that if she refused Meade or married Ted she might no longer look to her father for anything.

Mrs. Nording went along to make certain that Ted did not follow, and now that the proposal had come, she unmasked her batteries of eloquence and logic to urge the cause of the absent Meade.

The letter was ill-timed, for it arrived on the day that she had promised Ted to give him a definite answer, and when at last she tearfully consented to telegraph Meade an affirmative, it was with tear-heavy eyes that she made her way to the telegraph office.

In 10 minutes it was all over, she had sealed her fate, and with her heart crying within her at the violence she had done it, she retraced her steps to the hotel to write Ted, and try to make him see that she had had to give her consent.

She could not write for the tears that stood in her eyes, and it was not until she had her cry out that she was at last able to write the poor little note that put from her the happiness she had lost.

It was too late to mail it, and it was not until after breakfast next morning that she started for the post-office with the tear-baptized letter in her hand. She wanted to mail it herself, but the last thing she could do for Ted.

She faltered as she neared the station, and perceived Ted himself hurrying along the road. His face was wreathed in smiles and with a sinking heart she told herself that Ted had taken silence for an affirmative, and had come to receive his answer from

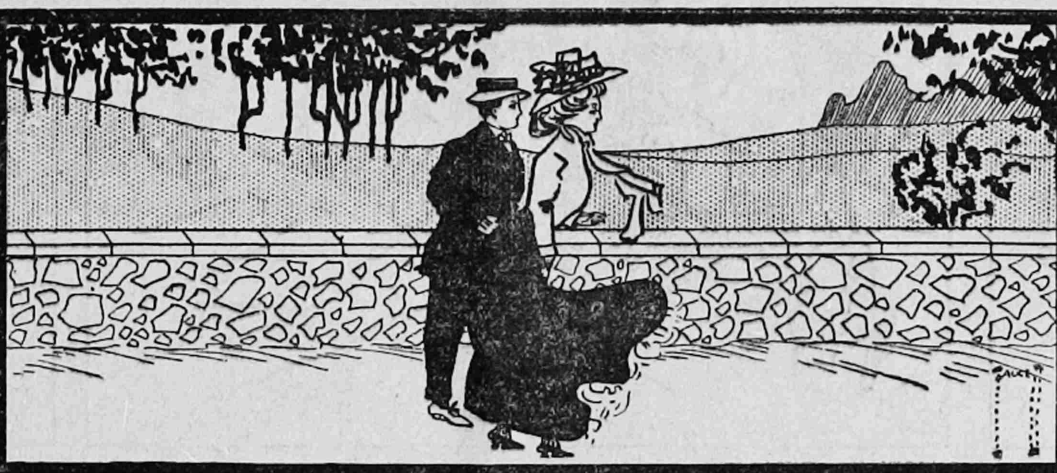
her own lips.

"Why didn't you write that you were coming?" she faltered as he took her hands.

"Was that necessary," he asked, "with your wire in my pocket?"

"My wire? I sent you no wire."

"That's a good one," he said approvingly. "I suppose that this is a forgery?"



"WON'T YOU ACCEPT THE GUIDANCE OF FATE, DEAR?"

He drew the yellow slip from his pocket and waved it before her eyes. Susie clutched at it and read it eagerly.

"I sent that to Mr. Meade," she said.

you and one of us will have to sue you for breach of promise."

"I only sent one and that was to Mr. Meade," explained Susie. "You see, Ted, you were not here and—"

"And your mother was, and you got a proposal from old Meade, and you meant to say 'no' and she wouldn't let you," explained Ted.

"But I did telegraph him 'yes' and I didn't telegraph you," protested Susie. "How did you get that?"

"Let's go over to the telegraph office and find out," suggested Ted. "Did you send it from the hotel?"

"Over there," Susie pointed across the street and Ted hurried her away.

The clerk smiled in response to Ted's rather excited demand for information, but he recognized Susie, and obligingly looked upon the original of the message. Ted gave a growl of triumph as he caught up the message blank.

"There it is as plain as day," he cried. "I don't care what you meant to write. What you did write was my address. Now are you convinced?"

"Persons often think of one name and write that instead of the proper address," explained the clerk smilingly. "There is some scientific name for it."

"It's fate," explained Ted as he nodded his thanks to the clerk and headed for the door.

Once on the street, he turned sharply from the main thoroughfare and headed for the country.

"Look here, little girl," he said pleadingly. "Even after you made the wrong move, fate decided against you, and you sent the message to me and not to Meade because your heart would not let you."

"You've been undecided between Meade and me for months now. Won't you let fate decide for you? We can get a license and see a minister in no time at all. Won't you accept the guidance of fate, dear?"

For a moment Susie paused, then she slipped her hand into his.

"It does seem like fate, Ted," she said with a tremulous little smile.

It did not take them long to get married. The clerk knew them both, and he issued the precious slip with alacrity, and went with them across the street to the minister's.

Ten minutes later they emerged again, and this time Ted's head was very erect and he was already rehearsing for the interview with his mother-in-law. The sight of the blue and white sign of the telegraph gave him an idea.

"Look here," he suggested. "Meade wanted to be put out of his misery by wire. Let's wire."

Blushing Susie followed him up to the cheerful clerk and she giggled as she read the message over his shoulder.

It was business-like as became the proposal itself and it ran:

"Mrs. Theodore Boroun begs to acknowledge J. Meade's kind favor of the 3d instant and regrets that a prior engagement prevents her acceptance."

"I guess that will break the news," commented Ted as he put down a bill to pay for the message. "There's the right address on that. Fate had done her share in deciding for you. I'll look after the rest."

IMMIE, take Sadie out and get her something to eat."

Of course, Mrs. MacPherson could not be expected to know that their engagement had been broken the night before, but it was decidedly embarrassing to be placed in charge of a man who only 18 hours since she had dismissed with an incoherent statement of the fact that she never wished to see him again.

"What Mrs. Mac says goes," reminded Falkman laughingly. "I know that you'd rather not, but I never would dare look Mrs. Mac in the face again if I disobeyed one of her commands."

"Your devotion to Mrs. MacPherson is touching," was the girl's sarcastic

reply. "Being more brave, I will take myself the liberty of releasing you from the unsought obligation."

"Be warned in time," urged Falkman. "Shall we mere mortals seek to overthrow the imperial dictates of the kindly little lady who so obligingly runs this small world of ours? Remember the fate of Mrs. Bissell, and be warned."

Sadie Arnold smiled in spite of herself. Mrs. Bissell's discomfiture was so recent that all their set were still laughing over the defeat of the woman who sought to wear social supremacy from Mrs. MacPherson and who had been forced to be at an inglorious retreat.

Falkman took advantage of the smile to guide her through the door into the room where a buffet lunch was being served. Dubiously he regarded the crush around the tables.

"I confess that my courage fails me," he announced.

"And you a football captain!" said Sadie with a scornful smile.

"That's different," was the prompt reply. "With nose guard and helmet and padded elbows and shin guards,

I might be willing to tackle that mob myself the liberty of releasing you from the unsought obligation."

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All the forenoon she had assisted to prepare for the opening of the bazar.

babel of small talk and sharp bargaining. The quiet of the tea room would be very refreshing.

Falkman read her assent in her eyes and hurried her away from the crowded room, where men fought for the refreshments for which they had paid liberally in purchases at the booths.

"This is nice," assented Sadie, half an hour later, as her cup was replenished with a fresh supply of miffins was brought. "I'm glad you thought of it, Jimmie."

The name had slipped out before she realized it. In the relaxation of comfort and quiet she had forgotten for the moment the quarrel of the night before.

Falkman wisely ignored the slip as he nodded assent. He was wise beyond his years in the ways of woman, and no gloating exclamation added to her confusion.

He might not have heard what she had said so intent was he upon dissolving the sugar balanced in his spoon.



JIMMIE

"I am very grateful to Mrs. Mac for giving you last night," she said. "May

care," announced Sadie to reward him for his action. "This is so much better than that tiresome crowd. My head is better already."

"You had no lunch," he reminded. "I'm always headachy when I'm hungry. That and the rest cure combined will do the work. Have some more of these preserves."

Sadie helped herself generously, but Falkman pushed away his plate. He hated afternoon tea and he could not stand a second helping.

Sadie watched him apprehensively. Now that he had stopped eating he would probably spoil it all by reopening the quarrel of the night before.

But Falkman had no such intention. Instead, he rambled on about the odd characters he had encountered at the bazar, and when, at last, Sadie reluctantly rose from the table, he walked down the avenue with her, still conversing upon safe and impersonal topics.

The soft spring air completed Sadie's cure, and as she paused before the steps leading to her home she held out her hand.

"You have something of mine I gave you last night," she said. "May

I have it, please?"

With a look that spoke volumes, he drew the ring from his pocket and placed it on her finger. "It was a brute to say for the message. 'There's the right address on that. Fate had done her share in deciding for you. I'll look after the rest.'"

"And report to Mrs. Mac?" amended Falkman. "Bless that woman!"

Sadie's glance was a caress, as she echoed his words and held out her hand in farewell. Mrs. Mac had given him the chance, but Jimmie had done the rest by simply doing nothing.

OTHERS DO FOR HIM.

"This is a generous old world after all," remarked the thoughtful thinker.

"How's that?" queried the dense party.

"If a fellow can't do for himself," explained the t. t., "he is almost sure to be done for by others."